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The Effect of *Healthy Families Alaska* on Trends in Child Abuse and Neglect

Background

In 1995, the State of Alaska implemented Healthy Families Alaska (HFA), a home visitation program designed to decrease child abuse and neglect. From January 2000 through October 2003, a legislatively mandated, prospective, randomized trial of program effectiveness compared children enrolled in HFA with control children at six sites. Study results demonstrated no effect—an outcome that might have occurred in part because control children received services beyond those dictated in the study protocol.¹ The retrospective cohort study presented here was a follow-up investigation undertaken to determine if this may have occurred.

Methods

The tested hypothesis was that children enrolled in HFA would have greater decreases over time in rates of abuse and neglect reported to and substantiated by Child Protective Services than would all children from the same communities who were not enrolled. Existing Alaska Department of Health and Social Services databases, including birth certificates, Child Protective Services records, and HFA enrollment files, were linked and evaluated. Rates are presented as 3-year moving averages because of small case counts during any particular year.

Results

During 1996-2002, there were 40,099 children living in communities with a HFA program, and 985 (2.5%) were enrolled in HFA. Rates of referrals for physical abuse without substantiation decreased from 73 to 42 per 1000 child-years of follow-up from 1996-98 to 2000-2002 ($p=0.005$, chi-square for trend) (Figure 1). All of the decrease in physical abuse referral occurred among children who received 20 or more home visitations by age 2 years (Figure 2). No change in physical abuse referral or substantiation was identified for unenrolled children. Regardless of enrollment status, no changes occurred in the rates of neglect referral or substantiation.

Discussion

The current study suggests that HFA may reduce the number of referrals for physical abuse, at least for children receiving 20 or more home visits. However, the current study supports the results of the randomized trial¹ in finding no effectiveness of home visitation—as implemented in Alaska—in achieving the program goal of reducing substantiated child abuse or neglect.

In the future, home visitation might succeed if it is revised substantially to include a) trained professionals implementing specific interventions that address the critical risk factors for child abuse (including domestic violence, substance abuse, and poor mental health), b) implementation of previously successful cognitive approaches, and c) a rigorous evaluation component.

Conclusion

Home visitation, as implemented during Healthy Families Alaska, does not prevent abuse and neglect during early childhood.

Reference

1. Evaluation of the Healthy Families Alaska Program: Final report, January 21, 2005. Alaska Department of Health and Social Services Website:

http://hss.state.ak.us/ocs/Publications/JohnsHopkins_HealthyFamilies.pdf, last accessed September 5, 2006.

Figure 1. The rate of physical abuse referrals and outcomes during the first two years of life, by HFA enrollment status; Alaska, 1996-2002 birth years.

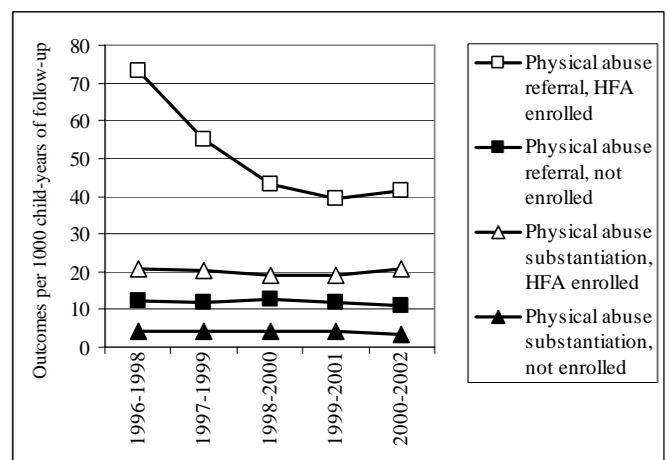


Figure 2. Rates of referral for and substantiation of physical abuse during the first two years of life by Child Protective Services among children enrolled in HFA, by number of HFA home visitations; Alaska, 1996-2002 birth years.

